

## Feminism's Toxic Twitter Wars

By Michelle Goldberg, *The Nation*

Empowered by social media, feminists are calling one another out for ideological offenses. Is it good for the movement? And whose movement is it?

In the summer of 2012, twenty-one feminist bloggers and online activists gathered at Barnard College for a meeting that would soon become infamous. Convened by activists Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti, the women came together to talk about ways to leverage institutional and philanthropic support for online feminism. Afterward, Martin and Valenti used the discussion as the basis for a report, “#Femfuture: Online Revolution,” which called on funders to support the largely unpaid work that feminists do on the Internet. “An unfunded online feminist movement isn’t merely a threat to the livelihood of these hard-working activists, but a threat to the larger feminist movement itself,” they wrote.

#Femfuture was earnest and studiously politically correct. An important reason to put resources into online feminism, Martin and Valenti wrote, was to bolster the voices of writers from marginalized communities. “Women of color and other groups are already overlooked for adequate media attention and already struggle disproportionately in this culture of scarcity,” they noted. The pair discussed the way online activism has highlighted the particular injustices suffered by transgender women of color and celebrated the ability of the Internet to hold white feminists accountable for their unwitting displays of racial privilege. “A lot of feminist dialogue online has focused on recognizing the complex ways that privilege shapes our approach to work and community,” they wrote.

The women involved with #Femfuture knew that many would contest at least some of their conclusions. They weren’t prepared, though, for the wave of coruscating anger and contempt that greeted their work. Online, the Barnard group—nine of whom were women of color—was savaged as a cabal of white opportunists. People were upset that the meeting had excluded those who don’t live in New York (Martin and Valenti had no travel budget). There was fury expressed on behalf of everyone—indigenous women, feminist mothers, veterans—whose concerns were not explicitly addressed. Some were outraged that tweets were quoted without the explicit permission of the tweeters. Others were incensed that a report about online feminism left out women who aren’t online. “Where is the space in all of these #femfuture movements for people who don’t have internet access?” tweeted Mikki Kendall, a feminist writer who, months later, would come up with the influential hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen.

Martin was floored. She’s long believed that it’s incumbent on feminists to be open to critique—but the response was so vitriolic, so full of bad faith and stubborn misinformation, that it felt like some sort of Maoist hazing. Kendall, for example, compared #Femfuture to Rebecca Latimer Felton, a viciously racist Southern suffragist who supported lynching because she said it protected white women from rape. “It was

really hard to engage in processing real critique because so much of it was couched in an absolute disavowal of my intentions and my person,” Martin says.

Beyond bruised feelings, the reaction made it harder to use the paper to garner support for online feminist efforts. The controversy was all most people knew of the project, and it left a lasting taint. “Almost anyone who asks us about it wants to know what happened, including editors that I’ve worked with,” says Samhita Mukhopadhyay, an activist and freelance writer who was then the editor of Feministing.com. “It’s like you’ve been backed into a corner.”

Though Mukhopadhyay continues to believe in the empowering potential of online feminism, she sees that much of it is becoming dysfunctional, even unhealthy. “Everyone is so scared to speak right now,” she says.

Just a few years ago, the feminist blogosphere seemed an insouciant, freewheeling place, revivifying women’s liberation for a new generation. “It felt like there was fun and possibility... a momentum or excitement that was building,” says Anna Holmes, who founded Jezebel, Gawker Media’s influential women’s website, in 2007. In 2011, critic Emily Nussbaum celebrated the feminist blogosphere in *New York* magazine: “Freed from the boundaries of print, writers could blur the lines between formal and casual writing; between a call to arms, a confession, and a stand-up routine—and this new looseness of form in turn emboldened readers to join in, to take risks in the safety of the shared spotlight.”

The Internet also became a crucial place for feminist organizing. When the breast cancer organization Komen for the Cure decided to defund Planned Parenthood in 2012, the overwhelming online backlash led to a reversal of the policy and the departure of the executive who had pushed it. Last year, Women, Action & the Media and the Everyday Sexism Project spearheaded a successful online campaign to get Facebook to ban pro-rape content.

Yet even as online feminism has proved itself a real force for change, many of the most avid digital feminists will tell you that it’s become toxic. Indeed, there’s a nascent genre of essays by people who feel emotionally savaged by their involvement in it—not because of sexist trolls, but because of the slashing righteousness of other feminists. On January 3, for example, Katherine Cross, a Puerto Rican trans woman working on a PhD at the CUNY Graduate Center, wrote about how often she hesitates to publish articles or blog posts out of fear of inadvertently stepping on an ideological land mine and bringing down the wrath of the online enforcers. “I fear being cast suddenly as one of the ‘bad guys’ for being insufficiently radical, too nuanced or too forgiving, or for simply writing something whose offensive dimensions would be unknown to me at the time of publication,” she wrote.

In some ways, the fact that people are being mean to each other on Twitter is hardly worthy of comment. Still, as the #Femfuture report attempted to point out, the Internet is where a lot of contemporary feminist activism is happening. “The Internet is the modern-

day agora,” says Cross, who studies online social dynamics in her academic work. “It is increasingly a place where so many people are coming together and doing very meaningful, very real things, so that the social patterns prevailing on the Internet are of interest to everybody.”

Further, as Cross says, “this goes to the heart of the efficacy of radical movements.” After all, this is hardly the first time that feminism—to say nothing of other left-wing movements—has been racked by furious contentions over ideological purity. Many second-wave feminist groups tore themselves apart by denouncing and ostracizing members who demonstrated too much ambition or presumed to act as leaders. As the radical second-waver Ti-Grace Atkinson famously put it: “Sisterhood is powerful. It kills. Mostly sisters.”

In “Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood,” a 1976 *Ms.* magazine article, Jo Freeman described how feminists of her generation destroyed one another. Trashing, she wrote, is “accomplished by making you feel that your very existence is inimical to the Movement and that nothing can change this short of ceasing to exist. These feelings are reinforced when you are isolated from your friends as they become convinced that their association with you is similarly inimical to the Movement and to themselves. Any support of you will taint them.... You are reduced to a mere parody of your previous self.”

Like the authors of #Femfuture, Freeman was trashed for presuming to represent feminism without explicit sanction, in this case of the group she’d founded with Shulamith Firestone. It began, she told me, when the left-wing magazine *Ramparts* published a neck-down picture of a woman in a leotard with a button hanging from one breast. The group decided to write a letter to the editor. Four members drafted one without Freeman’s knowledge, and when they presented it to the rest of the group, she realized it was too long and would never be printed. Freeman had magazine experience, and she decided to write a pithier letter of her own under her movement name, Joreen. When *Ramparts* published it but not the other one, the women in her group were apoplectic, and Freeman was excoriated at their next meeting. “That was a public trashing,” she says. “I was horrible, disloyal, a traitor.” It went beyond mere criticism: “There’s a difference between trashing someone and challenging them. You can challenge someone’s idea. When you’re trashing someone, you’re essentially saying they’re a bad person.”

For feminists today, knowing that others have been through similar things is not necessarily comforting. “Some of it is the product of new technologies that create more shallow relationships, and some of it feels like this age-old conundrum within feminism,” Martin says. “How do we disentangle what part is about social media and what part is about the way women interact with one another? If there’s something inherent about the way women work within movements that makes us assholes to each other, that is incredibly sad.”

There’s a shorthand way of talking about online feminist arguments that pits middle-class white women against all the groups they oppress. Clearly, there’s some truth here:

privileged white people dominate feminism, just as they do most other sectors of American life. Brittney Cooper, an assistant professor at Rutgers and co-founder of the Crunk Feminist Collective blog, is one of the black women who participated in #Femfuture, and she has spoken out against the viciousness that dominates Twitter. But she also emphasizes that the resentment expressed online is rooted in something real.

“I want to be clear: I think there’s an actual injury,” Cooper says. The online feminist efflorescence a few years back led to book deals and writing careers for far more white women than women of color. “Black women are brought into these mainstream feminist websites to bring a little bit of color or a little bit of diversity, but that doesn’t parlay into other career advancement opportunities.” On Twitter, by contrast, women of color, trans women and other people who feel silenced can amplify one another’s voices, talking back to people with power in an unparalleled way.

That doesn’t mean, though, that social media’s climate of perpetual outrage and hair-trigger offense is constructive. “There is a problem with toxicity on Twitter and in social media,” Cooper says. “I think we have to say that. I’m not sure that black women are benefiting from the toxicity.”

After all, it’s not just privileged white women who find themselves on the wrong side of an online trashing. The prospect can be particularly devastating for marginalized people who depend on the Internet for community. As an academic, Cross studies the terrifying harassment many women face from sexist trolls, but she says that putative allies can be nearly as intimidating.

Being targeted by other activists, she says, “leaves you feeling threatened in the sense that you’re getting turned out of your own home.... The one place that you are able to look to for safety, where you were valued, where there is a lot less of the structural prejudice that makes you feel so outcast in the rest of the world—that’s now been closed to you. That you now have this terrible reputation... I know a lot of friends that live in fear of that.”

If your professional life is tied up with activism, the threat is redoubled. “To suddenly be tarred by the very people that I’m supposed to be able to work with, my allies, as being a sellout or being infatuated with power or being an apologist for this, that and the other privilege—if that kind of reputation gets around, its extremely damaging,” says Cross.

The dogma that’s being enforced in online feminist spaces is often called “intersectionality,” but in practice it’s quite different from the theory elaborated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the UCLA law professor who coined the word. In a 1989 article in *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” Crenshaw described how the failure to consider the intersection of racism and sexism in the lives of women of color left a lacuna in civil rights law. She cited a failed lawsuit by a group of black women against General Motors; the court ruled

that while race discrimination and sex discrimination are both causes of action, “a combination of both” is not. Another of Crenshaw’s articles described a women’s shelter balking at accepting a Latina victim of domestic violence because she wasn’t proficient in English and thus couldn’t participate in mandated group therapy sessions. Her work can be theoretical, but it’s focused on legal and material conditions far more than patterns of discourse.

“My own efforts to create a voice and a perspective on these failures haven’t really been about chastisement, or a certain set of assumptions about what the articulation that I’m critiquing should have been, or what the failure of it represents in the person,” Crenshaw says, “but rather a collective effort to build a feminism that does more of the work that it claims to do.”

Online, however, intersectionality is overwhelmingly about chastisement and rooting out individual sin. Partly, says Cooper, this comes from academic feminism, steeped as it is in a postmodern culture of critique that emphasizes the power relations embedded in language. “We actually have come to believe that how we talk about things is the best indicator of our politics,” she notes. An elaborate series of norms and rules has evolved out of that belief, generally unknown to the uninitiated, who are nevertheless hammered if they unwittingly violate them. Often, these rules began as useful insights into the way rhetorical power works but, says Cross, “have metamorphosed into something much more rigid and inflexible.” One such rule is a prohibition on what’s called “tone policing.” An insight into the way marginalized people are punished for their anger has turned into an imperative “that you can never question the efficacy of anger, especially when voiced by a person from a marginalized background.”

Similarly, there’s a norm that intention doesn’t matter—indeed, if you offend someone and then try to explain that you were misunderstood, this is seen as compounding the original injury. Again, there’s a significant insight here: people often behave in bigoted ways without meaning to, and their benign intention doesn’t make the prejudice less painful for those subjected to it. However, “that became a rule where you say intentions never matter; there is no added value to understanding the intentions of the speaker,” Cross says.

There are also rules, elaborated by white feminists, on how other white feminists should talk to women of color. For example, after Kendall’s #solidarityisforwhitewomen hashtag erupted last fall, Sarah Milstein, co-author of a guide to Twitter, published a piece on the Huffington Post titled “5 Ways White Feminists Can Address Our Own Racism.” At one point, Milstein argued that if a person of color says something that makes you uncomfortable, “assume your discomfort is telling you something about you, not about the other person.” After Rule No. 3, “Look for ways that you are racist, rather than ways to prove you’re not,” she confesses to her own racial crimes, including being “awkwardly too friendly” toward black people at parties.

Now, it’s true that white people need to make an effort not to be racist. And there are countless examples of white feminists failing women of color and then hiding behind

their good intentions. Ani DiFranco provided a textbook example of what not to do when, following an uproar over her plan to hold a songwriting retreat on a former slave plantation, she then canceled it with a self-pitying statement: “I know that the pain of slavery is real and runs very deep and wide. However, in this incident I think [it] is very unfortunate what many have chosen to do with that pain.” (DiFranco later issued a more sincere apology.)

But the expectation that feminists should always be ready to berate themselves for even the most minor transgressions—like being too friendly at a party—creates an environment of perpetual psychodrama, particularly when coupled with the refusal to ever question the expression of an oppressed person’s anger.

“I actually think there’s a subset of black women who really do get off on white women being prostrate,” Cooper says. “It’s about feeling disempowered and always feeling at the mercy of white authority, and wanting to feel like for once the things you’re saying are being given credibility and authority. And to have white folks do that is powerful, particularly in a world where white women often deploy power against black women in ways that are really problematic.”

Preening displays of white feminist abjection, however, are not the same as respect. “What’s disgusting and disturbing to me is that I see some of the more intellectually dishonest arguments put forth by women of color being legitimized and performed by white feminists, who seem to be in some sort of competition to exhibit how intersectional they are,” says Jezebel founder Holmes, who is black. “There are these Olympian attempts on the part of white feminists to underscore and display their ally-ship in a way that feels gross and dishonest and, yes, patronizing.”

This reached an absurd peak during the tempest over #Femfuture. Jamia Wilson was one of the black women involved in the Barnard meeting, and she has since become part of the four-woman leadership team for the #Femfuture project, which continues to work on ways to make online feminism financially sustainable. She watched incredulously as white women joined in the pile-on about #Femfuture’s alleged racial insensitivity. One self-described white feminist tweeted at her to explain that no women of color had been at the Barnard meeting “and that I needed to be educated about that,” Wilson recalls. Somehow, activists who prided themselves on their racial enlightenment “were whitesplaining me about racism,” she adds, laughing.

In a revolution-eats-its-own irony, some online feminists have even deemed the word “vagina” problematic. In January, the actress and activist Martha Plimpton tweeted about a benefit for Texas abortion funds called “A Night of a Thousand Vaginas,” sponsored by A Is For, a reproductive rights organization she’s involved with. Plimpton was surprised when some offended Internet feminists urged people to stay away, arguing that emphasizing “vaginas” hurts trans men who don’t want their reproductive organs coded as female. “Given the constant genital policing, you can’t expect trans folks to feel included by an event title focused on a policed, binary genital,” tweeted @DrJaneChi, an

abortion and transgender health provider. (She mentioned “internal genitals” as an alternative.) When Plimpton insisted that she would continue to say “vagina,” her feed filled up with indignation. “So you’re really committed to doubling down on using a term that you’ve been told many times is exclusionary & harmful?” asked one self-described intersectional feminist blogger.

Plimpton takes intersectionality seriously—A Is For is hosting a series of discussions on the subject this year—but she was flummoxed by this purist, arcane form. “I’m not going to stop using the word ‘vagina’ for anybody, whether it’s Glenn Beck or Mike Huckabee or somebody on Twitter who feels it creates a dysphoric response,” she tells me. “I can’t do that and still advocate for reproductive freedom. It’s just not a realistic thing to expect.”

Mikki Kendall is unmoved by complaints about the repressive climate online. An Army veteran, graduate student and married mother of two in Chicago, Kendall is both famous and feared in Internet feminist circles. Mother Jones declared her one of the “13 Badass Women of 2013”—along with Wendy Davis and Malala Yousafzai—for her creation of the #solidarityisforwhitewomen hashtag. But as Kendall well knows, many consider her a bully, though few want to say so out loud. “I kind of have a reputation for being mean,” she says.

On the phone, Kendall isn’t mean. She seems warm and engaging, but also obsessed—she talks at length about slights made in the comment threads of blogs more than five years ago. As she sees it, feminist elites have been snubbing women with less power for years, and now that their power is being challenged, they’re crying foul. Their complaints, she argues, are yet another assertion of privilege, since they’re unmindful of how much more flak Kendall and her friends take.

“If you look at the mentions for me, for @BlackAmazon, for @FeministaJones, for a lot of other black feminists, it’s hard for us to see this other stuff as bullying, I’ll be honest with you,” she says. “Because we are getting so much more than ‘I don’t like your article.’ And we’re getting it all day. I had someone who spent four hours last week dumping porn images into my mentions. I’ve had people send me pictures of lynchings. So then when somebody says, ‘Oh, this article is terrible,’ and a bunch of people talk about how terrible an article was, and you say that’s bullying—I’m going to side-eye your definition of bullying.”

The problem, as she sees it, lies in mainstream white feminists’ expectations of how they deserve to be treated. “Feminism has a mammy problem, and mammy doesn’t live here anymore,” Kendall says. “I know The Help told you you was smart, you was important, you was special. The Help lied. You’re going to have to deal with anger, you’re going to have to deal with hurt.” And if it all gets to be too much? “Self-care comes into this. Sometimes you have to close the Internet.”

Few people are doing that, but they are disengaging from online feminism. Holmes, who left Jezebel in 2010 and is now a columnist for The New York Times Book Review, says

she would never start a women's website today. "Hell, no," she says. The women's blogosphere "feels like a much more insular, protective, brittle environment than it did before. It's really depressing," she adds. "It makes me think I got out at the right time."